

How Technical Should Project Managers Really Be | S4Ep17

Hello everyone and welcome back to The People, Process, & Progress Podcast, I'm your host Kevin Pannell. On today's episode, **How Technical Should Project Managers Really Be? | S4Ep17** I'm speaking to Project Managers, aspiring PMs, team leads, and anyone involved in software or technical projects. My goal is to talk through the optimal level of technical understanding for project managers, emphasizing the value of technical literacy without overstepping into solution design, and balancing tactical involvement with strategic oversight...but first, let's set the ground rules.

Play PPP intro...

I started my IT career pulling PC towers, manually saving favorites and files from one hard drive, installing a fresh copy of Windows X, then re-copying all the files back onto the fresh OS. As my IT career grew, I became a tech in the field, then an IT support manager. I needed to maintain my technical skills to provide the best service to my customers. Decades later, as a Project Manager and then leader of PMs, I found myself calling on my old technical skills and at times struggled with chiming in on technical solutions when I may have been more effective stepping back and facilitating conversations.

So, for today's episode, **How technical should PMs **actually** be?** let's talk through four focus areas of the value of technical literacy, avoiding the "solver" trap, balancing tactical vs. strategic, and how non-technical PMs can learn from their more technically inclined team members.

Section 1: The Value of Technical Literacy for PMs

- What is "technical literacy" for PMs
 - o To me, technical literacy is not about coding or deep engineering, but understanding the core concepts and technologies involved in the project. Like how a PC or laptop prints, the basics of network topology, how key software in your business is configured, and the ever important, awareness of Info Sec policies and procedures.
- So, why is technical literacy crucial?
 - o I have found having some technical literacy, even competency, can and has improved my communication with technical teams. Tech literacy provides PMs that ability to speak their language, understand their challenges, and to ask more informed questions.
 - o In addition to improving relationships and communication, technical literacy allows PMs to provide more accurate estimations. This in turn give the team a better grasp of the effort, or often assumed effort, involved in technical tasks.
 - o Knowing a bit about tech also helps PMs enhanced their risk assessment abilities. PMs aware of the tech in and around their professional space will be more able to identify potential technical roadblocks and developing mitigation strategies.
 - o One of most important benefits of PMs being tech savvy is an increase in credibility with stakeholders. Think of the initial discussions with vendors as they display their miracle solution. Dropping a technically informed question during the discussion demonstrates an understanding of the technical aspects of the project, or at least that you are more than a note taker and task updater.

Section 2: Avoiding the "Solver" Trap: When Technical Knowledge Becomes a Hindrance

- Why is it not a good idea for PMs to put themselves into technical problem solver mode?
 - o Diving into the tactical aspects of the project distracts from core PM responsibilities. To me, the overarching mission statement of all PMs across the world is, *"To provide process facilitation, relationship management, and transparent reporting of projects so that the project team is highly functional, team members are engaged, and stakeholders at all levels are aware of what is happening with the project and the direction it is headed."* If we are mired in troubleshooting mode, it's hard for us as PMs to meet our own mission statement.
 - o We asked for technical SMEs for a reason. If we constantly try to solve the problem, we can easily undermine the technical team's expertise and ownership. Instead, PMs can queue up the questions and ensure the team is aware of *what done looks like*, then step back and allow the team to build the plan and the solution.

- In addition to losing focus of the big picture and undermining the tech SMEs, PMs being too technical can lead to suboptimal solutions if the PM does not have the deep technical expertise in each area.
- So, how to resist the urge to solve?
 - Recognize and self-reaffirm your role as a facilitator and communicator.
 - Think about, if you are old enough, Stuart Smalley from 1990s SNL. Look in the mirror and say, “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and dog gonnit, I’m the PM, not the Analyst.” If you are too young to remember that Google Stuart Smalley. It is worth it.
 - Trust the expertise of your technical team.
 - This is one of the most important things a PM can do. Empower the team and listen to them. If you hear something that sounds way off, ask clarifying questions.
 - In fact, asking clarifying questions instead of offering solutions is a fantastic way to *coach* the team towards success without *consulting* them to death with technical guidance.
 - Make sure we’ve defined the problem clearly and ensured the team has the resources to solve it. If not, ask the technical SMEs what they need and reiterate the reason for the project.

Section 3: Balancing Tactical Involvement with Strategic Oversight

- Keeping the big picture in mind and ensuring the project aligns with overall business goals is of paramount importance for PMs.
- Let’s talk about when tactical involvement is appropriate:
 - When the PM needs to understand technical dependencies and how they impact the schedule. As we build the plan, we need to know these dependencies and how they do or don’t align.
 - If the PM is facilitating communication and collaboration between technical teams. PMs are often asked to get multiple groups together. PMs should be able to articulate the reason for the cross-team collaboration.
 - As the PM tracks progress and identifies potential roadblocks. PMs will and should ask a lot of questions here and being technical can help with risk prediction.
- How do PMs stay at the right altitude, e.g., tactical vs. strategic?
 - Delegate tasks to the appropriate team members. To me, this means all tasks except the traditional PM ones.
 - Focus on high-level planning, risk management, and ask the technical SMEs often for their review, feedback, and sign off on all plans.
 - Use project management tools to track progress and identify issues. Pictures and graphs have helped me and my project teams countless times. If we have the data, we as PMs should queue up helpful summaries for the team to have shared awareness.
 - Regularly communicate with stakeholders about the overall project status. Have a solid project communications plan, follow it, and adjust it to the tools and the tempo that fits the people on the project team.

Section 4: Practical Tips for PMs to Enhance Technical Understanding

- What if you’re PM, or want to be, and are not technical at all?
 - Fortunately, in 2025 there are many online courses, industry publications, conferences, and online or in-person networking opportunities.
 - PMs, if they want to advance their careers, must embrace continuous learning. This is particularly important as technology is constantly evolving. Of note, soft skills also need to evolve as the workplace has from in person, to remote, and now a hybrid of both.
 - We as PMs are charged with building relationships with all project team members, including our technical teammates. This aligns with the concept I’ve shared here of relationships before outcomes within a process. Fostering open communication and mutual respect is critical.
 - Asking the right questions will also help PM technical knowledge. Not being afraid to say, “I don’t know,” as well as learning to formulate questions that elicit useful information without overstepping.

Thank you all for listening to ***How Technical Should Project Managers Really Be*** Whether you’re breaking into the project management field, or a salty PM veteran, it’s important to find the right balance of technical knowledge with process facilitation. Thank you for listening to me as I facilitated this episode. Please go to peopleprocessprogress.com

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Until next time, this is Kevin Pannell, and reminding myself and each of you to keep your hope alive as it ignites your passion, create actionable plans to guide your teams, and take action to transform yourself and those around you for the better.

Godspeed y'all.